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Why the Catholic Church Cannot Accept Socialism

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By

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Why the Catholic Church Cannot Accept Socialism.

T may seem strange to many who have a fairly good knowledge of the teaching and practice of the Catholic Church, that there should be such a conflict as we find existing between it and Socialism. For the two seem to have a strong resemblance; and it seems that there should be sympathy rather than antagonism. If Socialism meant anarchy, of course the conflict would be easily understood; for the Church is a well-ordered and governed society. But so is the ideal social state; in it everyone has his proper place and regular duties.

And the ideals or aspirations of both seem really very similar. The Church fully acknowledges that the highest form of its own life is that practised in its religious orders or communities, which is modeled, we may say, on that led by our Lord Himself with His chosen Apostles during His ministry on earth; with a common purse, in charge of one of their number, for the common good. And this form of life was the one adopted in the beginning by the Church of Jerusalem. It did not become that of the whole Church throughout the world;

but that was not because it was disapproved as a form of life, but simply because, as men are actually constituted, it could not be successfully carried on by all. But still we find the Church reverting to it here and there, in her religious communities, and carrying it on most successfully; indeed it is only in the Church that it has been an actual success. And it has always, when showing signs or promise of such success, and when undertaken in the manner necessary to produce it, been most highly approved of by the higher Church authority.

Why, then, should the Church condemn in mankind at large what she so highly approves among her own members? Why should she tell men in general not to do what she so strongly recommends and indeed invites some, at least, of her own children to do? This really seems to many a sort of scandal, and to imply that the Church is not quite sincere in this approbation which she gives to the common or, as it may be called, the socialist life in her communities, but only tolerates it, her authorities really preferring to have private property retained by the great mass of her members, and indeed to a very large amount by some of them; and this, it may be said, in order to receive substantial assistance for themselves in this way.

These questions, which are not imaginary, but really raised, are not, however, so puzzling as they may appear. Let us consider the matter carefully, and we shall see

why the Church cannot adopt the socialist programme for a general one; why, if so adopted, she must regard it as dangerous to the general welfare.

The first reason is that what we may call the fundamental idea of Socialism is absolutely erroneous, and contradictory to Catholic teaching. And that idea is, that morality is a matter entirely in the jurisdiction of mankind, instead of being subject to the law of God; that it rests on and can be determined by popular vote. This idea may not be expressly formulated in all socialist teaching; but still it exists. In particular, it finds utterance in the dogma, generally held by Socailists, that private ownership of land, or of the means of production in general, is intrinsically wrong, or at any rate can be made so by popular consent. Some Socialists, still recognizing that there is such a thing as Divine law, would content themselves with declaring that private ownership is contrary to this law; but others ignore the existence of any such law. Now the Catholic Church not only holds that there is such a law, but also that private ownership is not forbidden by it; and that no vote or consent of mankind can make it otherwise. The Church of course admits that a man may lawfully abandon this right; but she denies that he can be forced to do so. In what are called the solemn vows of her religious orders, such an abandonment is made, but the Church takes extreme care that it should be perfectly and absolutely voluntary,

and that even such vows do not radically abolish the capacity of those who make them to hold property, so that if circumstances justify it, in the judgment of the Church, the capacity may return.

The words of our Lord Himself, Whom some Socialists are desirous to claim as the first of their number, are quite explicit to this effect. We read in St. Matthew's Gospel (chap. xix.)—and the same event is also recorded by St. Mark and St. Luke—that a rich young man came to our Lord, and inquired what he should do to have life everlasting. Our Lord told him that he should keep the commandments; and on the young man's asking Him what commandments He meant, He mentioned several of the Ten Commandments of the Decalogue, adding also that of loving one's neighbor as oneself. One of the Commandments He mentioned was, "Thou shalt not steal." The young man answered that he had kept all these. Our Lord did not say, "No, you have not, for you have no right to possess private property of your own, for you, in doing so, are taking what belongs to the community." No, He acknowledged that the lawful possession of private property is not stealing. But on the young man asking what yet was wanting to him, our Lord said, "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." In other words, "Join our community." You will notice

that He told the young man to sell what he had. But how could he sell it, if it was not really his to sell? Now notice just what these words of our Lord were in reply to the young man's repeated question. He told him to sell what he had and give the money to the poor. But He did not absolutely require this. He told the young man to do this, *if he wanted to be perfect.*

Now the Catholic, and really the only possible, explanation of these last words is that there are some things which a man may do to please God, but which are not required as of obligation, or under pain of sin. These are known in the Church not as laws, but as "counsels of perfection." They principally come under three heads: namely, the renunciation of property, of marriage, and of one's own will by obedience to someone to whom one gives a right to require it in the name of God. This obedience, of course, only extends to actions not contrary to the laws of God, or of some regularly constituted general authority—as that of the State—acting also, of course, in a way not contrary to the Divine law.

St. Paul writes specially in his first Epistle to the Corinthians (chap. vii.) of the second of the counsels just named. He himself had never married. He says, "I would that all men were even as myself; but everyone hath his proper gift from God; one after this manner, and another after that. But I say to the unmarried, and to the widows: it is good for them if they so con-

tinue, even as I. But if they do not contain themselves, let them marry."

Now in religious communities or orders, sanctioned by the Church, which may be said to be on the socialist principle as to property, the two other counsels which have been named form a regular part of their rule. To give greater security, as well as merit in their observance, all three are usually strengthened by vows to be faithful to them. When these vows are taken, they of course become not merely counsels, but real laws of conscience; that of obedience, however, only being so under the restrictions mentioned above. No religious Superior can require anything contrary to the laws of God, or of the regular and general authorities which God has established.

These religious communities have been the only experiments on the socialist principle with regard to the first counsel, that of the renunciation of private property, which have ever succeeded for any length of time. And notice that they all rest in the beginning, for each individual, on a voluntary act on his or her part. And, also, the Church has always regarded this act as one resulting from a special call or inspiration on God's part. She has distinctly, especially at the Council of Trent, forbidden even parents to compel their children to make such an act. She holds that, as St. Paul says, everyone has his proper gift from God. This gift from

God she calls a "vocation." And she requires such a vocation even for the priesthood, on account of the second counsel as well as on account of the special sacred duties and responsibilities which those becoming priests undertake. She even requires this vocation for the orders preparatory for the priesthood, of deacon and subdeacon.

It is or should be plain, then, why the Church does not and cannot look with favor on the idea of making the socialist régime or arrangement binding by law on all citizens of the State at large. It can only work successfully when adopted by each individual with absolute freedom of choice, and, moreover, with a special Divine call. To establish it as the right course for all, is in her judgment simply a case of "fools rushing in where angels fear to tread."

"But," it may be asked, "if this life in community with property in common, is so pleasing to God, why should He not give this special call to all who would like to have it, and make it a success for everyone, instead of merely for a few?" This is a question which may be interesting, but one which no one has any Divine commission to answer. The important fact is simply that He does not, and that there is no reason to think He ever will. With all the care, both for the sake of the community and of the individual, that the Church takes in the matter, there are many who, though at first fully

persuaded that they have a vocation to this common or—as we call it—religious life, find on trial that they must have been mistaken. An actual trial of it is usually necessary, and it is for this reason that the Church insists on what is called a novitiate, or time of experiment for everyone desiring to engage in it. It is not probable that many who have a Divine vocation to it refuse to make this experiment; so there cannot be many who would succeed in it outside of those who actually try. But the proportion of those who even try is exceedingly small, and many of those who do try fail. So it is evident that a vocation to it is a very rare one, even among Catholics, who have every encouragement to make the trial.

It does not, then, require any great perspicacity to see what would be the result if everyone should be required to make it. All would like to have it tried, if it simply meant that they should have a share of other people's property; but when it came to giving up their own, the result would not be satisfactory, even if their own subsistence were secure, as is the case in most of the religious communities of the Church. There is absolutely no reason to suppose that if all were required to adopt the socialist manner of life, all would be contented with it. In our religious communities, those who find, in the novitiate, that it does not suit them can leave; and indeed they can do so even afterward. No force compels them

to remain. And they can even obtain proper permission to do so. But in a socialist state, comprising all citizens, such would not be the case. The great majority, in fact, would, if not returning by a revolution to the previous conditions, return to them individually by disregarding its regulations so far as possible, and by securing for their own use as large a share of the goods of life as they were able. You can say no one can consider anything as his own; but you cannot prevent his using it as his own, if he wishes, and has an opportunity to do so. And, furthermore, there must be officials of some kind in the social state, as well as in any other; indeed everyone in it would be a sort of official, with regular duties and responsibilities. In other words, you cannot prevent what is known as "grafting" any better under Socialism than you can as things are now. The only thing that can effectually prevent it is conscience, which says to a man: "Thou shalt not steal;" and the force of this Commandment is much weakened if you tell him that no individual has any real right to property. As it is now, people have much less scruple against defrauding the government than they have against cheating an individual; and there is no reason why the government, in a socialist form, should acquire a peculiar sanctity in the general estimation.

The only way in which a socialistic government can hope to succeed would be the same way in which the

religious orders succeed, that is to say, by an enthusiastic and persistent devotion to its principles on the part of the whole people. Simply establishing it will not produce such a devotion.

Of course Socialists claim that if it is once introduced, everyone will find its results so agreeable that such a devotion to it will arise. But that is a mere assertion, not borne out by facts, even in the case of religious communities, which always tend to lose their first fervor instead of increasing it, though every individual member has in the first place entered upon this life voluntarily.

For this common sense reason, the propaganda of Socialism, if carefully considered, even though merely advocating that all should begin by entering on it voluntarily, cannot be considered as resting on a sound basis. Human nature cannot be expected to undergo a complete and radical change. If such a change, or rather such a victory over human nature, can only be expected in those who are the very best disposed, and the least selfish of all, who have made the sacrifice of their own property, and of all except the necessities of life, in a Catholic religious order, and if even some of these fail to persevere in these unselfish dispositions; how can it be expected to continue steadily, even in those who first entered into the socialistic agreement; and how much less can this be expected in their children and their children's

children, or in immigrants who for various reasons enter into a socialistic state? There are quite enough as it is who refuse to admit the obligation in conscience of submitting to any government at all; anarchists we call them. How many more will there be if sacrifices such as the socialistic plan requires are exacted of them? Even if you succeed in convincing them that private ownership is essentially wrong, or can be made so by popular vote, how can you expect them to persevere in this conviction, or to receive it as a certain dogma from their predecessors, in face of the numerous and urgent temptations to a contrary opinion?

No; Socialism, even if adopted in the only possible way that the Church could approve, that is to say in the way in which it exists in her religious orders, by a perfectly free and voluntary consent, would, as was said in the beginning, lead only to disaster; simply because it is certain that the consent of human nature to it would not persevere. Catholics hold that perseverance in the voluntary poverty of the religious life can only be obtained by a special grace of supernatural help from God, which He will grant to those whom He has called to that special virtue, but which it would be rash to expect without such a call. To expect everyone to persevere in it, simply because they had, even voluntarily, begun, would really be almost, if not quite, as rash as to expect men in general to keep absolute virginity through life, which

is of course the only lawful alternative to the state of matrimony. And if the poverty of the religious life is not kept perfectly, the evil only affects the delinquent, or at most the particular religious house to which his example may spread; and, moreover, if he finds his virtue inadequate to it, he can be permitted to go. But in attempting the same thing in a whole nation, the government will be a failure, either by the neglect of its principles or the departure of its citizens. The idea that everyone will be even a passably good citizen under it, is simply a rose-colored dream. It invites and is sure to lead to corruption, and consequent failure and disaster; for it is asking from nature more than it can accomplish without a special supernatural help. The world in general may not believe this, but we Catholics, if understanding our religion, know that it is true. This is a quite sufficient reason for us to oppose the socialist plan.

Strangely enough, there is another of the special virtues belonging to religious communities which Socialists would force on the public at large. This is, evidently, the virtue of religious obedience. The socialist plan necessarily involves this. In the present state of things, as far as the government is concerned, a man is quite probably able to fit himself for and enter upon any occupation which seems to him most agreeable and suitable to him. But on the socialist plan he must be assigned to his occupation according to the needs of the commun-

ity, rather than his own preference. He is to be assigned to his post very much like an officer or soldier in an army. Some pressure may, of course, under the present system, be put on a young man in this way by his parents or others; but he can generally manage, if he has a decided preference, to gratify his own desire. He may want, for instance, to become a medical man; and probably be able, at least, to try. But in Socialism, the government must decide what will be the best disposal of him for the common good. If it considers that there are enough doctors already, or that he could do better at something else, off he goes to that something else. He is, indeed, very much like a Jesuit; for the Jesuits make a special point of the virtue of obedience. But there are not so very many Catholics who have a real vocation to be Jesuits. The socialist young man, however, has to be as good a Jesuit as he can, without any special vocation. From our somewhat extended experience, success is hardly probable. It is not likely, indeed, that he will even desire it. Love of the socialist régime, even if he has it, is far from being as strong a motive as the love of God.

It would seem, then, very improbable that Socialism can succeed in enabling the average citizen to sacrifice his liberty in the way that it is sacrificed in religious communities. It is liberty which is more prized than anything else by men, especially at the present day and in

a country like ours; and the restraints placed on it by government are very slight with us. But Socialism increases them very decidedly. The only way in which the obedience of a religious community can be observed is by regarding it as paid to God through His representative in the Superior; and Socialism does not present this motive to us. Religion is a side issue with it; a man may be religious if he wishes; it does not undertake to prevent him from being so; but certainly religion has nothing to do, in the socialist idea, with his duties in the State.

If we now consider the remaining one of the three virtues of the religious community life, that of absolute chastity, it is quite evident that this does not and cannot form a part of the socialist plan, unless, as among some non-Catholic communities like the Shakers, inviting all to join them, it were proposed as a fitting preparation for the end of the human race. Socialism may then be considered as being the community life on the basis of the other two virtues of poverty and obedience; in other words, of the renunciation of individual ownership and of individual will. But even with these it is quite arduous, as has been seen.

It may be presumed that for absolute chastity, Socialism would substitute the married state, as the world in general does now, always has, and always will. If it would abandon the idea of union for life in marriage, that of course would be more than enough to make any appro-

of it by the Church utterly impossible. We would need nothing more to show why it could not be accepted by us. We assume, then, that Socialism is to include marriage and the natural existence of families.

But here, again, a difficulty immediately arises, namely, who is to have charge of the family? The logical conclusion of the socialistic scheme would seem to be that the ownership of it, as of property, must reside in the State. It must be supposed to belong to the State, though perhaps under the principal care of the parents. But radically, like everything else, it must be a State asset, and to be taken care of as the State directs. And this seems to be the usual socialist view, as actually held by those who thoroughly develop that view or theory.

Now here we have an irreconcilable difference between the teaching of Socialism and of the Church. In the Catholic view it is to the parents, not to the State, that the direction of the children is divinely committed. Even in case of the neglect of the parents, or of their death, the State has no absolute right over them. It only has the right to see that they are brought up to be good citizens, not to injure the State or their fellow-citizens, and to obey the laws of the State when these are not contrary to the law of God. It must leave them to the control of the parents in other matters, as long as they need such control. They are the natural guardians of their

own children, and the State must not take this natural and Divine right to guardianship from them.

The parents are responsible to the State, in some matters, as has just been said; but beside this the Catholic view is that Catholic parents are also responsible to the Church in other matters, particularly in regard to the religious instruction of their children. And it is here that practically a very serious Catholic objection to Socialism comes in.

This difficulty is felt even now to a great extent in the exaggerated ideas prevalent as to the functions of the State in this matter. And it would, in all probability, be much increased by the still more exaggerated idea of the State which is inherent in the socialistic theory.

Religion, with us, is not simply a matter of sentiment, to be felt or carried out by each individual according to his own private taste or preference. It is, in our view and belief, a system of truths and consequent practical duties coming to us as a revelation from God, through Christ and His Apostles, and committed to an organization founded by Divine authority, and known to us as the Church. We do not regard the Church as simply a society like others in general, based on mutual consent and for mutual convenience. No; we look upon it as a Divine association, into which Almighty God requires that all should enter, though many may be excused from sin in not doing so by ignorance of its claims. But for

those who do belong to it, its orders, when acting in its proper spiritual sphere, are as binding as any laws of any State can be. And we cannot agree that any secular government has a right to override its orders, or ignore its laws, even though that government, personally, should be in the hands of men who are Catholics; and still greater, necessarily, is the difficulty if they happen to be men who do not recognize the claims of the Church, or who are, perhaps, infidels or even atheists.

There is no need that we should prove our position on this point at present, or even to show any reason for it; we are only saying what the fact is with regard to our belief in this matter; and why, finding considerable difficulty as we do from the opposition to this belief generally prevailing now, we cannot be inclined to accept a system like Socialism, in which the difficulties, owing to the overweening claims of the secular authority under the system, would become much greater than they now are. The probability, of course, with regard to the last point, concerning the family and children, is that the Socialist State would insist on Socialism being taught in all schools, and the Catholic view of the authority of the Church being entirely repudiated.

Let it be thoroughly understood then, that

1. The Church does not reject Socialism in the sense of a voluntary agreement as to the renunciation of individual property, or the sacrifice of the individual will

among a certain number of chosen souls called by God to this renunciation and sacrifice, and specially aided by His grace to carry it out.

2. She does absolutely reject it as far as it teaches that individual ownership is forbidden to all, or that the only right condition of things in any nation is the thorough subjection of all to the State system which Socialism proposes.

3. She holds that this system, so far from being the only right system, is fraught with great dangers to the liberty which we all so highly prize; since it is not in human nature, unaided by a special grace, to carry it out in the perfection necessary to its success; and that, therefore, corruption is sure to ensue in it, and the virtues which it requires to become tyranny on the part of some, slavery on that of others.

Now, in conclusion, it must also be thoroughly understood that the Church fully realizes the great evils which have grown up by the accumulation of immense amounts of wealth in the hands of a few, which threatens to reduce the great majority of mankind to a condition of practical slavery, and that she sympathizes with the advocates of Socialism in their desire to abolish these evils; but that she simply rejects this special plan as being primarily founded on statements as to human rights which are absolutely false, and which, if carried out in practice, would tend to increase these very evils rather than to abate them.

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